

OFFICIAL REPORT (HANSARD)

Wednesday, April 2, 2008

Komagata Maru Incident

Ms. Ruby Dhalla (Brampton—Springdale, Lib.)

moved:

[Motion]

That, in the opinion of the House, the government should officially apologize to the Indo-Canadian community and to the individuals impacted in the 1914 Komagata Maru incident, in which passengers were prevented from landing in Canada.

She said: Mr. Speaker, in 1914 a huge injustice occurred in our nation, an injustice that left a huge black mark on our nation's history, an injustice and tragedy that will forever serve as a reminder of the struggles and challenges that immigrants have encountered in their hope for a better future in Canada. The incident, the injustice and the tragedy that I speak of is the incident of the *Komagata Maru*.

On May 23, 1914, the *Komagata Maru*, a passenger ship, arrived in Vancouver at the Burrard Inlet with 376 passengers from India. On board were 340 Sikhs, 12 Hindus and 24 Muslims. Many of them had fought alongside the British in wars and gave their lives for the commonwealth. They were British citizens coming to a commonwealth country, yet upon their arrival they were horrified to learn that they would be denied the opportunity to disembark and enter Canada. The grounds were Canada's immigration laws, exclusionary, discriminatory and racist, passed in the 1900s and designed to select immigrants based on race and country of origin.

Legislation was passed which stated that to be admitted to Canada, immigrants were required to come by continuous journey from their countries of birth and to have at least \$200. Even though the continuous journey regulation did not mention race or nationality, it was indeed an open secret that the regulation was intended to be applied to those coming from India or China.

Hence, Canadian authorities did not permit these passengers on the *Komagata Maru* to leave the boat. For two months these passengers lived in prison like conditions, with little food and water. They lived in conditions of famine, starvation and disease. The Indo-Canadian community at that time, in particular those from the Khalsa Diwan Society, struggled to assist them and fruitlessly negotiate on their behalf in order for them to stay in Canada. Unfortunately, despite their efforts and struggles, at the end of the two months, only 24 passengers were given permission to stay in Canada. The rest were ordered deported.

On July 23, 1914, the Canadian government of the day brought in the cruiser, HMCS *Rainbow*, which aimed its guns at the *Komagata Maru* and ordered for it to be escorted out of Canadian waters. Friends and supporters watched this bitter and horrific injustice as it was the first time that the Canadian navy had used a ship for aggression.

A journey that had begun on April 4, 1914, from India ended on September 29, 1914, when the *Komagata Maru* returned to Calcutta, India. Upon its return, some of the passengers were killed and others arrested.

This tragedy is an injustice and serves to remind us of this dark chapter in our nation's history. Ninety-four years later, this chapter still remains open. Neither the Indo-Canadian community nor those who were impacted or affected have ever received an apology from the government for this mistake of the past.

Many before me have raised this issue, individuals from the Indo-Canadian community, municipal, provincial and federal politicians, like the members for Newton—North Delta, Bramalea—Gore—Malton, people like Sahib Thind of the Professor Mohan Singh Memorial Foundation, Sukhi Badh of Radio Punjab, Mr. Gurbinder Dhaliwal of Radio Sher-e-Punjab, Radio India's Maninder Gill and Gurpreet Singh and Kulwinder from Red FM. However, despite their efforts and persistence, an apology has yet to be received.

Some Canadians might ask why this is important to raise nearly a century later. It is ironic that 90 years later we have another Conservative government that is once again deciding to overhaul our immigration system, which would perhaps provide the minister with discretionary powers to pick and choose who comes to our nation.

(1755)

We only need to be reminded of the injustices of the past, injustices like the *Komagata Maru* incident, or the time from 1885 to 1923 when there was a head tax for the Chinese, or the period from 1923 to 1945 where strict immigration rules prohibited the Jewish from entering our country.

Those were not proud moments in our nation's history. We must not, as a nation, go back to the politics of exclusion, discrimination or racism. We must move forward as a country.

As a proud Canadian, a proud Sikh and a proud Indo-Canadian, I have seen and heard first-hand how the injustices of the *Komagata Maru* incident has left families around the world, including many in the Indo-Canadian community, with scars and with pain that can never be forgotten.

In 2006 there was a glimmer of hope when the Prime Minister spoke at the Gadri Babiyan da Mela Festival in Vancouver and stated:

I also want you to know that the Government of Canada acknowledges the *Komagata Maru* incident and we will soon undertake consultations with the Indo-Canadian community on how best to recognize this sad moment in our history.

As I stand here today I cannot help but wonder why nearly two years after making this commitment there has been absolutely no progress. Why is it that two years later the community continues to wait?

This is an opportunity today for the Prime Minister and the Conservative government to follow their words with action and correct a wrong that occurred during a time when there was another Conservative prime minister.

We, as Canadians and as parliamentarians, cannot play politics with this issue. No apology 94 years after the injustice and 2 years after the government acknowledged the incident is a tragedy in itself.

When we as a nation have done wrong in the past we have always done the right thing and the courageous thing. We have always apologized.

In 1988, a formal apology and acknowledgement of unjust treatment and violation of human rights was given regarding the Japanese Canadian internment. On June 22, 2006, an apology was given to the Chinese for the implementation of the Chinese head tax. Just recently, in November 2007, Parliament passed a motion recognizing that Japan used women as sex slaves during World War II and encouraged the federal government to press the government of Japan to make a formal and sincere apology to all victims referred to as comfort women.

However, I would urge all of my colleagues today, regardless of their political stripes, regardless of their political affiliation, to put partisan politics aside and do the right thing and support this motion.

It is with a great deal of pride that when one looks at Canada we see the rest of the world. Canada is a symbol of hope for so many, a country in which equality, opportunity, acceptance and respect are our hallmarks. We are a nation in which there are over five million visible minorities, all having the chance to succeed and to realize and fulfill their dreams.

Canada is a nation that has been built on the hard work, the vision, the passion and the efforts of immigrants. We are a nation in which, despite events like the Chinese head tax and the *Komagata Maru*, Canadians from the Sikh community, the Indian community, have been able to succeed, to achieve, to prosper and to contribute to the building of a better and brighter future for our nation.

It is so imperative that we be able to reflect and learn from our mistakes. We must never forget as Canadians where we come from, the sacrifices that have been made by those who have come before us and the struggles and challenges that we have faced as a nation to truly become the symbol of hope, the envy of the rest of the world.

We must move forward as Canadians and as a nation. We must turn the page on this dark chapter in our nation's history. We must begin that process with three simple words: We are sorry.

(1800)

Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC):

Mr. Speaker, I have a very simple question for the member for Brampton—Springdale. At what point do we stop apologizing? At what point do we set the limit for apologies that the Government of Canada would make to various groups, to Canadians, for past injustices?

The incident she raises was truly a tragedy. It was a most unfortunate incident. In the decades that have passed since that tragic incident, the country has become more enlightened and has progressed and has a very different view of what it means to be a citizen of this great country.

However, at what point do we, as a country, establish a limit for these apologies? Many injustices have been done to immigrants of various ethnic backgrounds in decades and centuries past, whether they were Irish, Scottish or Jewish immigrants. At what point do we set those limits?

Until recent decades, the University of Toronto, for example, had quotas for certain minorities to restrict their entry into professional schools. At what point do we say that, yes, those were injustices but we will move on, we will look to the future and we will deal with injustices in our time?

Ms. Ruby Dhalla:

Mr. Speaker, there have been many injustices that have occurred in the past. We only need to take a stroll down memory lane to realize that from 1885 until 1923 there was a head tax on the Chinese. The Chinese people were not even given the right to vote federally until 1947. If we take a look at the Italian community, the German community and the Jewish community, they have all been impacted by injustices that have occurred. Programs have been set up to provide the opportunity for students, for future generations and for youth to be educated on the struggles and the challenges that have been faced in the past.

We have done the right thing, as parliamentarians, as a government previously, to apologize to the Chinese and the Japanese community. It is unfortunate that in this particular situation, for this grave injustice and dark chapter in our history, that the Indo-Canadian community has received no apology.

I do not think that we as parliamentarians and elected officials representing our constituents should be pitting one ethnic community against another. That is not the right approach. However, when an injustice as grave as this one has occurred, it is an opportunity for all of us to do the right thing, to provide that leadership and issue an apology for a grave injustice that was done in the past.

(1805)

Hon. Bev Oda (Minister of International Cooperation, CPC):

Mr. Speaker, I have been listening very intently to the arguments put forward by the hon. member on the opposition side. I would like to ask the member why it took a Conservative government to apologize to the Japanese Canadians. Why, over 13 years of Liberal government, was nothing done when the Chinese were asking for acknowledge and an apology? Why did it take this Conservative government to compensate and recognize the Chinese Canadians? Why, if the *Komagata Maru* victims are asking for recognition, which went back over 20 years, did the Liberals, when they were in power for years, not act on this?

This is just another demonstration by the members opposite that, instead of trying to do the right thing on principle, they are now asking for something that they had the power to do when they were in power. They do not believe they should act on principle. They only want power so they only say things at times when they think they will be re-elected to power rather than on principle.

Could the member tell me why, in all the many years that her government had the ability to do what she is asking, did it not do what she is asking this government to do?

Ms. Ruby Dhalla:

Mr. Speaker, need I remind the member that it was the Conservative government that came in and cancelled \$55 million of the acknowledged commemorate and educational program for many of these injustices that have been done. This is an issue on which we cannot have partisan politics. It is an issue where all parliamentarians should come together and do the right thing and issue an apology.

I must remind the hon. member that in 2006 the Prime Minister stood at an event with the Indo-Canadian community in Vancouver and stated that he would try to move forward on a recognition. It has been two years later and this motion is an opportunity for the Prime Minister to back up his words with action, instead of empty rhetoric, to do the right thing and to support this motion because Canadians are counting on the Conservatives to do that.